Tobacco and Stress – A Bad Combination
USA Center for Health Promotion and Preventive Medicine

Soldiers face stresses unique to their occupation. Time away from home, deployments, and a heavy workload cause Soldiers to feel substantial work-related stress. The Army offers a wide variety of stress-management tools, ranging from recreational opportunities to behavioral health services. In the past, smoking breaks were also offered as a stress management tool. While smoking breaks are no longer officially given, many Soldiers continue to smoke and use tobacco because they believe it helps them deal with stress.

However, research shows that nicotine does not reduce feelings of stress. In fact, nicotine-addicted individuals need nicotine simply to feel normal. Studies show that what appears to be the relaxing effect of smoking is really a reversal of the tension and irritability that develop when nicotine levels in the blood are falling.

Because of the addiction to nicotine, regular tobacco users feel heightened stress between each use of tobacco. This negative mood is repeated throughout the day, making tobacco users feel above average levels of daily stress. A recent study found that military members who use tobacco to specifically reduce stress reported significantly higher stress levels than those who did not use tobacco.

The physical, mental, and emotional changes that result from nicotine addiction make tobacco users even more vulnerable to feelings of stress while under pressure. In fact, just the thought of losing their "fix" can cause tobacco users to feel stressed. This response could reduce a Soldier's ability to focus and adversely impact mission performance. Nicotine withdrawal symptoms such as irritability, anger, frustration, anxiety, depression, impaired concentration, and restlessness are not compatible with military duties that depend on concentration, critical thought or being alert.

Bottom line: Tobacco use increases stress. Studies have found that former tobacco users are less stressed than current tobacco users. So the first step the tobacco user should take when trying to reduce stress is to quit tobacco. Quit tobacco resources can be found at www.UCanQuit2.org

For more information on tobacco and stress, visit:
http://www.apa.org/releases/smokestress.html
http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qa3912/is_200803/ai_n25139850/